1: Ammar E, 1-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellamin MK13
Silwa

BIRTH, INFANCY AND EARLY TRAINING

be more attached to his home if his head has first 'fallen into it' at birth (masqat ar-ras).

There is no policy of any kind for limiting birth, either by spacing it out or by practising birth control. Birth control in the modern sense is unheard of, and in any case it is considered as a religious sin, and deemed an interference with God's creation.[1] A part of the married male ethos is not to regulate his sex desires, but to give them full play whenever the need arises. Continence is not a desirable thing for a married man, but to have sexual intercourse with his wife is a good religious deed (hasana). One should not counteract sexual desires but rather stimulate them, and hence the various devices such as special food and aphrodisiacs like hasheesh and opium are resorted to for sexual potency. The writer heard of no woman who has practised any device to confer sterility on her.

The period of the 'forty days' is enshrouded in a great deal of secrecy and psychological delicacy. For fear of the evil eye, the influence of the evil spirits, or sterility, the mother should adhere to the rigid system of food, minimum movement and general seclusion and other taboos. This is the period in which another woman who wants to become pregnant might suddenly 'press' on her, and thus she could be hampered or delayed in her next pregnancy. However, when a visitor comes to the house the mother covers herself as well as the child and pretends to be feeling rather uncomfortable, either groaning or suffering from pain. In referring to the baby, visitors must be careful not to praise it openly, unless they use the safeguarding phrases such as 'God preserve him' (or her), 'may the Prophet's blessings be upon him'. On enquiring about the sex of a child, if it is a boy, his sex is usually hidden at first to be declared afterwards.

Concerning the child itself, one observes that it is announced and introduced in various ways. In the case of a boy, a 'gong' is produced in his room every morning and every evening; the purpose, as it is believed, is to make the child brave and not to fear any unexpected shock. Yet the reaction of the neighbours on hearing the sound is one of recognition that 'the so-and-so's are sounding for their child'.

The naming ceremony in the case of a boy is the second link in the chain of introducing the child to his neighbours and relatives. Actually the name is usually agreed upon before birth, though the ceremony is the formal occasion for declaring the name. Women have no formal congregation like the men, but a small portion of food and meat is sent to the homes of the female relatives. It is to be stressed that very few people have a naming ceremony for the girls, which is also a male gathering. The motive behind the girls' ceremony could be regarded as a kind of religious puritanism to counteract the pre-Islamic sin of burying the girls alive.

[1] A scholar of al-Azhar told the writer that the Grand Mufti of Egypt recently issued a 'fatwa' permitting the use of contraceptives and sanctioning abortion 'when the fourth month, that is 'before the child is gifted with a soul'.